

NSC BRIEFING

26 March 1958

**SUMATRA--MILITARY GEOGRAPHY**

- I. Sumatra has an area slightly larger than California.
  - A. It is 1,100 miles long and about 290 miles wide at its widest point.
  - B. It lies across the Equator.
- II. Sumatra can generally be divided into 4 major geographic zones, each of which extends almost the entire length of the island.
  - A. On the east is a vast forested swampland that ranges in width from about 5 miles in the north to about 100 miles near Pekanbaru.
  - B. West of the swamps is a belt of gently rolling well-drained plains that is about 5-30 miles wide in the north but increases southward to a maximum width of about 100 miles.
    1. It is generally heavily forested, although major cultivated areas are found in the vicinity of Medan and southwest of Palembang.
  - C. A broad zone of heavily forested hills extends west from the plains and increases in height and ruggedness until the crest of the forested main mountain range is reached which varies in altitude from 3,000 to more than 12,000 feet.
    1. The major are at an elevation of 3,500-4,000 feet.
    2. Significant centers of agriculture and population are found in valleys and basins within this mountain zone.

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- D. On the west, the main mountain range drops steeply to a narrow, discontinuous coastal plain.

III. Transportation in general is poorly developed.

- A. In the swampland, the only significant method is by waterways.
- B. On the plains, the roads, while narrow and sparse, are adequate for limited military usage.
- C. In the mountains, usefulness of roads is severely limited by steep grades, sharp curves, and frequent landslides.
- D. There are three separate railroads of only local importance.

IV. Sumatra's climate is monotonously hot and humid.

- A. Temperatures near sea level range from the low 70's at night to high 80's in afternoon.
- B. Rainfall is heaviest (more than 100 inches annually) and most frequent along west coast and over mountains. Much of rainfall comes in form of thunderstorms, especially during March-May, that is at the present time, and October-November.

V. By way of illustrating terrain, a force moving by road from Pekanbaru to Padang (240 miles) would encounter following conditions.

- A. About 5 miles of road across level, well-drained terrain, through heavy tropical evergreen forest.
  - 1. The forest is cleared from the roads on either side.
- B. About 15 miles of swamp, road surface raised above level of swamp, dense vegetation immediately adjacent to road.
- C. About 30 miles of heavily populated and intensely cultivated level land (rice, rubber) adjacent to the Kampar Kanan river. Two ferries would be encountered in this stretch.

**D. About 145 miles of hilly and mountainous terrain, generally heavily forested except for cultivated highland basins (rice, mixed farming) around Pajakumbuh and Bukittinggi. One highway tunnel, one river ferry, numerous one lane bridges, would be encountered.**

**1. Road has steep gradients, sharp turns, narrow defiles, susceptible to land slides.**

**2. The maximum elevation of the road at the pass is 3,600 ft.**

**E. Then on the other side of the mountains, about 45 miles of generally level terrain, cultivated to rice and mixed farming, on the immediate approaches to Padang.**

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